"The COVID-19 Infodemic"

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An infodemic, or an "over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it"[1] is currently spreading in many of our online and personal communities. I'm sure all of us have seen our fair share of misinformation (when people share incorrect or misleading content[2], or when satire is taken seriously) or disinformation (when people make or share intentionally harmful content) spreading on social media and elsewhere during the COVID-19 pandemic. My team is currently working on a recently funded project[3] led by Timothy Caulfield from the University of Alberta to understand what kinds of misinformation on coronavirus and COVID-19 exist online, to understand where this misinformation is coming from, and to learn more about how people are responding to it.

This is broadly an area of research that my team were planning to get going on this year, but more on the topic of myths and misinformation about cancer prevention and how they spread online; 2020 had some different plans. The grant team, which also includes numerous collaborators as well as co-Investigators Drs. Christen Rachul (UManitoba) and Gordon Pennycook (URegina), are applying these principles to examine the spread of misinformation about COVID-19.

For my team's first project, called "Coronavirus is a #hoax!, we used content analysis to examine the dominant themes of 300 Instagram posts marked with the hashtags #hoax, #governmentlies, or #plandemic. We also wanted to understand whether COVID-19-related social media posts were being "co-branded" with other authority-questioning or conspiracy theory-driven hashtags. We knew that many social media platforms are using algorithms to remove blatantly untrue posts, and that these would often use straightforward hashtags like #covid or #coronavirus. The idea that coronavirus is a hoax was an intriguing one to follow this line of thinking, so we selected #governmentlies (the most common co-hashtag with #hoax during our data collection), and #plandemic as the most common co-hashtag that was more overtly linked to the coronavirus pandemic.

Our results, which are soon-to-be submitted for publication, showed that the broad theme of general mistrust was the most common refrain – the idea that the government or media outlets are fabricating or covering up information about COVID-19. The second most frequent theme was conspiracy theories – the belief that the earth is flat, or anti-vaccination attitudes. We also found that COVID-19 is indeed commonly being represented in association with authority-questioning beliefs. For posts coded as having a general mistrust theme, over half of them were also directly or indirectly implicating COVID-19.

Our team is excited to be working in this dynamic research space (and as part of such a great broader team) and look forward to learning more about the ever-changing landscape of the COVID-19 infodemic. We will also be taking what we learn in this project to investigate how cancer prevention misinformation spreads online.

References

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[1] https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf?sfvrsn=195f4010_6
[2] https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-researc/168076277c
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